Susan Leviton: A case for being more than just a

Susan Leviton '72 cares about children—but she's no Mr. Rogers. Then again, the poorer streets of many urban and rural communities in Maryland are decidedly not Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. That simple fact speaks volumes about what motivates this 25-year veteran and graduate of the School of Law: Her whole career—teaching, advocating, mentoring, and everything in between—has been based on the belief that there is always more to be done to better the lives of young people in this state. "It's not good enough" is Susan Leviton's constant mantra.

So far, those words have served her well. Leviton, who serves as law school professor and supervisor for the law school's vaunted Clinical Law Program, as well as past president and chairperson of Advocates for Children and Youth, the statewide non-profit organization she co-founded in 1987, is receiving some overdue attention these days. She is frequently quoted in the media when the subject is children, and politicians pay both attention and respect when she goes to Annapolis to speak out. In 1996, she made the Daily Record's list of Maryland's Top 100 Women and Baltimore maga-
zine's list of the city's 25 Smartest People. Just last fall, Leviton's impressive track record was vetted by the university, which presented her with its 1997 Public Service Award during its Founders Day commemoration.

Is she kicking back and reveling in her success? Nah.

"My goal, always, is to represent the children who need the most help," Leviton says. "I want to say that these kids have a right to get the same kind of service my own kids would get. That's how I look at it."

Leviton is known throughout the state as a tenacious and infectious advocate, a happy warrior who won't quit until she is satisfied that a social service agency or a school or a state committee—it clearly doesn't matter whom she has to talk to—is doing everything possible to help a child. By example, she shows the budding lawyers and public-policy enthusiasts in the law clinic that this kind of work can take place in cramped, small-town offices as well as on the floor of the Maryland Senate.

With 20.5 percent of children living in poverty in the United States, Leviton has quite a task before her: Poor children, especially those with special needs, are generally not well represented in either the public or private sector. On top of that, their families often don't believe that "the system" can work for them—there is a dynamic at work between poverty and bureaucracy that often ends in futility. Clearly, however, watching and listening to Leviton speak her mind in her overflowing office in the law school, she enjoys the struggle.

"I love teaching here, and I see the results of my work when my students go on to important roles in the juvenile court, in the legislature, in the governor's office, or in public and private agencies. I feel good about that," she says. "Plus, I have the opportunity to represent people who think they can never win, and when they do, they're very enthusiastic about it. That's empowering to me."

Leviton has never allowed her advocate stance to shut down at the classroom door. She also writes, drafts policy, testifies and generally gets on a soap box for numerous causes in which children have a stake. She and her students represent children in abuse and neglect, delinquency and special-education cases. Over the years she has developed multiple strategies to "represent the kids who need the most, but who receive the least."

It is probably her strategizing that offers the best insight into the Leviton persona (students of politics and coalition-building, take out your note pads):

- Start with the assumption that whatever's been done, it's not good enough.
- Approach the situation with flexibility—remember that there are many different possibilities when solving any problem, even those that afflict challenged children.
- Never whine!
- Don't fall for that old saw about how it's somebody else's responsibility ("This one drives me crazy," Leviton says).
- Be honest and forthright—even when it hurts. But be diplomatic about it.
- Hold on tight to your sense of humor—it will set you apart from the drones.
- Don't go through life thinking that it's all about you. The work is what lasts.

It's that last bit of advice that Leviton appears to savor most when she's musing about her abilities.

"I don't have a great need to be liked," she says, a broad grin crossing her face. "I have found that if you tell the truth, say what needs to be said, that people won't like you any less, and, in the end, you'll get more done."

Whether she's working on a landmark piece of scholarship like "Maryland's Exchangeable Children" (a 1983 Maryland Law Review article which led to significant changes in the state's delivery of social services to mentally handicapped children and their families) or making the case for Medicaid recipients to receive guidance in choosing the appropriate managed care plan (the jury's still out on that one), Leviton calls 'em as she sees 'em.

That begs the question: What does this focused enthusiast believe the future holds for the poor, especially poor kids? "It's a big if," Leviton says. "If we can get to a point in this country where we see the value in assuring that every child has a right to the basics—a roof over your head, decent food, a place to play, affordable health care and jobs for parents, then we'll get through the rest. If not, I'm afraid we won't be able to guarantee anything. Public safety, the ability to retire with an acceptable income—all of those things are in doubt. I know it's selfish, but there it is."

Sounds like an appropriate mix of liberal and conservative values: We have to invest in the needy if we want a good country for ourselves, our kids, for everybody. If we want Mr. Rogers' neighborhood.

"You don't have to be a rocket scientist to see what these children need," Leviton says. "They need what my own kids need."

Mr. Rogers, put on your work boots. Susan Leviton is coming.